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ABSTRACT

In Old China, working women had no rights in such matters as politics, economy, culture, society, and family life. Women were governed by the Chinese feudal society tradition. When "new" China was founded in 1949, working women made up the 7.5 percent of the total work force. By 1983, the number of working women had increased to 36.5 percent. In addition, women's work has extended far beyond its traditional range. Women are working in industry, commerce, architecture, communications, agriculture, scientific research, public utilities, and government. This study, conducted with families in 14 rural provinces, sought to determine the educational and economic status of women. Married women (N=179) in rural provinces were interviewed and questionnaires were filled out by women (N=187) working in township enterprises of the rural provinces to provide additional information about rural women. The female subjects were divided into three age groups: the young (18 to 36 years of age), the middle (37 to 55 years of age), and the old (over 56 years of age). Examination of the age groups showed that the women in the young age group were more satisfied with their lives than were women of the middle and old age groups. The younger rural women who had received more education and gained full-time employment at township enterprises were able to raise the family living conditions. (LLL)

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EXPERIENCES AND STATUS OF CHINESE RURAL WOMEN: DIFFERENCES AMONG THREE AGE GROUPS

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Abstract

In old China, working women had no rights in such matters as politics, economy, culture, society and family life. Women were governed by the Chinese feudal society tradition. When the New China was founded in 1949, working women made up the 7.5 percent of the total work force. By 1983, the number of working women had increased to 36.5 percent. In addition, women's work has extended far beyond its traditional range. Women are working in industry, commerce, architecture, communications, agriculture, scientific research, public utilities and government.

A research study conducted on families in fourteen rural provinces determined the educational and economic status of women. The female subjects were divided into three age groups: the young (18 to 36 years of age), the middle aged (37 to 55 years of age), and the old (over 56 years of age). The study provides evidence that there are improvements in the economics, educational and social status of rural women but the improvements and changes are not the same for each age level. The educational level affects the ability of the women to obtain employment in specialized industries thus impacting the economic status of the family.

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EXPERIENCES AND STATUS OF CHINESE RURAL WOMEN: DIFFERENCES AMONG THREE AGE GROUPS

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'Holding up Half the Sky' is a writing from Chairman Mao Zedong's "Red Book." The professional women have popularized 'Holding up Half the Sky' for describing the women's improved economic, political and social situation and status. This does not hold true for the rural Chinese woman. The women of China make up almost half the population of China. Rural women of China make up the majority of China's female population. The status of the rural women during each period of history must be examined closely. There is a marked difference in education and economic status of women from the different age groups.

In "old" China prior to 1949, women were governed by the Chinese feudal societal traditions, therefore, working women had no rights in such matters as politics, economy, culture, society and family life. With the founding of "new" China in 1949, women made up the 7.5 percent of the total work force. The "new" China brought changes in women's status. The economic development reforms since 1979 brought more changes. By 1983, the number of working women, both urban and rural, increased to 36.5 percent. In addition, women's work options extended from their traditional roles to industry, commerce, architecture, communications, agriculture, scientific research, public utilities and government. Today, women make up 40 percent of the personnel in new and developing technological fields, such as the electronics industry.

The women of underdeveloped rural society continued to be restricted by

the "old" China traditions. They receive limited education, lack economic status, and have no freedom in the choice of a marriage partner.

This research study was based on the data collected by Professor Dai from two surveys of women in Kongsu village of Zhenghai County in Zhejiang Province and Yiaotang village of Tianchang County in Anhui Province. These studies were conducted under the auspices of the Department of Marriage and Family Study at the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and were a part of the Research Project on Rural Family Study of 14 Provinces. Professor Dai Kejing personally interviewed the 179 married women of the rural provinces. Questionnaires were filled out by 187 women working in township enterprises of the rural provinces to provide additional information about rural women. Meetings that focused on topics of concern for rural women were conducted by the All-China Women's Federation in these rural provinces.

The findings from the surveys were divided into three age groups: the young age-group (18 to 36 years), the middle age-group (37 to 55 years), and the old age-group (over 56 years). Even though there has been many changes since the 1949 revolution and the 1979 economic reform, the women in the different age groups were at different levels of economic, social and political status. The study provided evidence that improvements in the economics, educational and social status of rural women had occurred, but the improvements were not the same for each age group.

This paper primarily compares and contrasts: (1) the educational status of the rural women in Zhejiang and Anhui provinces to women in urban areas, (2) how the educational level affects the economic outcomes of the family, and (3) explain the differences of educational levels among the age-groups of the rural women in these two provinces.

The Young Age-Group: Ages 18 to 36

The women of young age-group have a better life than of the old age-group women. The women of the young age-group are offered more educational opportunities and an increasingly higher percent take advantage of these opportunities. Women of the young age-group have been helped by laws, such as Marriage Law of 1950 and the Constitution of 1983, stating that women have equal rights with men in education, work, and self-determination in marriage.

Young women, called peasant girls in China, at the age of six enter primary schools. and then on to middle schools. Dai's study shows that most of the young girls attended three to four years of primary school and two to three years in junior middle school. The study also shows that most young peasant girls drop out of school. A primary reason for dropping out of school is that parents hold to the traditional idea on education that learning to read and write is of no value for women. Another significant factor restricting the education of girls is the economic conditions of the family. When money is limited, more often the son not the daughter is educated.

The level of education of young women affects their ability to participate in economic endeavors of the community. The young age-group women with higher education levels than the middle age-group or the old age-group women can find employment in the township enterprises. Township enterprises are mainly based in villages and rural market towns. Township is the term now being used for the "old" communal farm. Data from both provinces show that in the "specialized households", the production was being carried out by younger women. Specialized households are categorized as enterprises or industries above what are normally considered farm work of

planting or raising poultry. These "specialized household" enterprises provide income in addition to the farm income for the families. Of the 1,573 specialized households involved in the Tianchang County of Anhui Province, fifty percent were staffed primarily by women. In the Kongsu village of Zhejiang Province, two industries--a badminton equipment plant and a printing shop--with a total of 300 employees, 89 percent were women. More than fifty percent of these women were in the 18 to 36 age-group. One of the two managers in the badminton equipment plant was a 33-year old woman, and the manager of the printing shop was a 35-year old woman. The educational background of the two women managers were the primary grades plus one and two years of junior middle school. When responding to interview questions, one of the women managers stated that when women with education were able to get a job in an enterprise this improved the economic circumstances and the family's interrelationships. The extra money earned by this woman provided her with more "clout". Because of this economic impact, she had become the manager of the household budget. This young woman also told that she and her husband made joint decisions about buying for the home, such as the purchase of a colored television.

When this group is compared to older women, we find that older women when they were young could not buy anything, however insignificant, without the permission of their husbands. Even though the older women had worked very hard on the farm, they had no income. In a 1939 study by Fei Xiaotong of rural families, married women had an extremely low status in the family. A married woman had to serve her husband, in-laws and children before she could eat.

Of the 187 women studied in the township enterprises in Tianchang County of Anhui Province, more than 67.3 percent were in the 18 to 35 years

age group. Of these 187 rural women, 49.7 percent had several years of primary school, 43.3 percent had some junior middle school, 2.1 percent had one to two years of senior high school, three 45-year old workers were illiterate and six between the ages of 33 to 40 were illiterate.

Evidence from the Dai study shows, that even though rural women have a lower rate of social development than their urban counterparts, that the younger rural women are increasingly taking advantage of educational opportunities. When asked in the interviewing process, if they expected to further their education, all responded "yes." Most of the young women did not want to stop their education, to marry and to stay home to care for husbands and families. Many young women preferred to be employed thus providing a steady income and enabling them to save toward a dowry. The young women wanted a husband with a higher level of education than theirs, because they could earn a higher income. The analysis of the data of the young age-group shows that the educational development of young women provided a better economic future for women.

The Middle Age-Group: Ages 37 to 55

Women of the middle-age group were born and reared during the period from the Japanese invasion and occupation to shortly after the 1949 revolution. During this period the living conditions of people were harsh and those of the rural women were even more harsh. Most of the rural women of this age-group were semi-literate to illiterate. In the Kongsu village of the Zhejiang Province, of the 127 women studied in this age-group, 38 percent were illiterate.

Women and men of the 37 to 55 age-group hold the Confucius belief of male superiority that wives are taken-for-granted as servants and bearers of off-spring. Women of this age, when interview and asked how satisfied they

were with their marriage, all responded that, whether or not I am satisfied, there is no choice for a woman of my age. Women of this age-group have high expectations for their children. These women expect to provide economic support so that their sons may attend a university. A son attending the university brings honor to the family, and a university degree may provide the avenue for him to attain employment in the city. These middle-age women object to the fact that daughters must receive a higher grade than sons on the enrollment examinations in order to be admitted for work in the township enterprises.

The Old Age-Group: Age 56 and Over

Women of the old age-group were born during the period when China was a feudal, semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. Their lives are described by Dai as "sad and miserable". Of the 111 women in this age-group studied in the Kongsu village of the Zhejiang Province, 97 were illiterate, seven were semi-literate, six had about four years of elementary school, and one had six years of elementary education.

Most women of this age-group are dependent upon their sons for economic support. While the Chinese traditional family ethic of obligation to parents is still strong, it is changing. The development of modern economics has eroded the traditional role of leadership held by older family members. Following the 1949 revolution, free education became available and the younger generation is developing a new value system, which include individualism, independence and reduced obligation to family. Thus increased independence of the younger generation is resorting in reduced economic authority by the older generation.

Summary

In "old" China, men dominated women. Even though this feudal-patriarchal ideology China is changing, the rural women of China do not necessarily enjoy an elevated status. Examination of the age-groups shows that the women in the young age-group were more satisfied with their lives were women of the middle and old age-groups. The younger rural women who have received more education and gained full-time employment at township enterprises were able to raise the family living conditions. The lives of the rural women of middle and old age-groups showed a greater influence of traditional thinking that men are dominated and women are chattel.

The educating the daughter of a rural family does not have as high a value as that of the education of a son. Many women in the rural areas of China do not receive the level of schooling that those of urban areas receives. Of the 220 million illiterate and semi-illiterate people in China, 92 percent resides in the rural areas, and 70 percent of this total are illiterate women (Dai 1990). In one village used in the study, 38 percent of the women in the middle age-group women were illiterate, while others were semi-literate. In the old age-group, 87 percent of the women were illiterate. When all age-groups were compared to women in the city, the urban women receive more education than the rural women. This study shows that, since the economic reform of 1979, younger rural women have greater access to primary and secondary education and have more economic opportunities in the rural society.

This study shows that young women have a greater awareness of their lower status and of the gender equalities. Young women are developing their own attitudes about the need for education and economic development. Even though young women are inhibited by prevailing patriarchal ideas and

traditions, the restrictive factors have less impact on the younger women, they are more fortunate than the older women who were reared in a feudal society. The rural women of the young age-group received more education than those of the middle age-group, who received more education than the women of the old age-group women. Even though the differences between the urban and rural women in all age-groups are great, this study indicates that the township enterprise programs are contributing to the educational and economic development of women in China. The rural women are making great strides towards equality, but the importance of educational and economic programs must be attained as well as the programs expanded before the women of China are truly 'Holding Up Half the Sky.'

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